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1961/03/26

Far East (Gen.)

(Laos - pt. 8)

TOP SECRET

RECORD OF A DISCUSSION AT U.S. NAVAL BASE AT
KEY WEST, FLORIDA, AT 12.10 p.m. on
SUNDAY, MARCH 26, 1961.

Present:

Prime Minister
Sir Harold Caccia
Air Chief Marshal
Sir George Mills
Mr. Bligh
Mr. Greenhill
Mr. Ledward

President Kennedy
Mr. C. Bohlen
Mr. McG. Bundy
Mr. F. Kohler
Mr. C. Chapman
General Fontana

President Kennedy thanked the Prime Minister for being ready to interrupt his tour of the West Indies to visit the United States but he was most anxious that there should be a common front between the U.S. and the U.K. on the problem of Laos, especially in the light of the forthcoming SEATO meeting and the interview that he was having with Mr. Gromyko on the following day. He was sure in particular that evidence of a common front would help to steady SEATO. Why he had felt the meeting necessary was that the message he had received from the Prime Minister raised a number of points. He was of course hopeful that Russia would accept a cease-fire but if they did not do so there would be pressure from Thailand and other SEATO members for some positive action to be taken. The Prime Minister's message had seemed to indicate that the United States should take the action and not SEATO. This was the point he wished to discuss. It seemed to him to be of critical importance.

The Prime Minister explained that the Cabinet had considered this question on Thursday evening and had met

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again at midnight to consider the draft of his message. The United Kingdom of course hoped that they would be able to get the Russians to agree to discussions. If they did then there would be no problem. Of course the Russians might be trying to exercise pressure on the West wherever they could. Mr. Khrushchev seemed less anxious for a detente than previously. This might be due to a weakness in his own internal position. Mr. Bohlen thought that Khrushchev was behaving in this way because of differences in opinion between Russia and China. Russia was trying to re-assert her lead of the Communist world; he doubted whether there was much internal pressure on Mr. Khrushchev.

The Prime Minister continued that the Cabinet were agreed that if the Russians were not prepared to start discussions then there should be an intensification of paramilitary action, which might produce results. The President said that there had already been some intensification of this and there was an increase of trained personnel at the forward level. The President added that the current situation in Laos was militarily about the same.

The Prime Minister then went on to talk about the third phase of possible action, namely military intervention. The United Kingdom Cabinet had understood that there was to be a strictly limited military objective - but what would be the purpose of this? Would it be to try to secure international discussion, and last only so long as that continued? Might it not in fact be the very thing that would prevent international discussion taking place? Perhaps the argument for military intervention rested more strongly on the need to

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make a stand against aggression. Who should act? The United Kingdom had had doubts about SEATO action. For example it would raise a number of difficulties with India if Pakistan took part in a SEATO operation. If the King of Laos made a request to SEATO would it not be possible for the Organisation to ask the Power with troops available to act in its name? The other countries could give some help, perhaps in other ways. The Prime Minister thought that the precedents of Lebanon and Jordan were the ones to follow. In that case there had been, at the invitation of the Governments concerned, a military operation undertaken to secure a political objective. It had in fact succeeded. Could not the same be done in Laos? Action could be taken by the request of and under the aegis of SEATO.

The Prime Minister went on to say that the United Kingdom Cabinet had not agreed on military intervention by U.K. forces, but they would be readily prepared for the U.K. to give full moral and diplomatic support if the United States were to go into Laos at the request of SEATO. If he were now to be pressed to agree to U.K. physical support he would have to seek the concurrence of the Cabinet. In any event, before any military operation was undertaken, there would have to be a well managed and well organised operation in the United Nations, as otherwise the United States would find itself faced with the same difficulties as faced the United Kingdom during Suez. The Prime Minister thought if the United States were to act militarily there would be full moral and diplomatic support from Malaya, and that India would be all right provided Pakistan troops did

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not take part. It would probably be useful if there were to be some Asiatic troops associated with the United States.

President Kennedy said the United States had recently changed their policy with regard to Laos. They now considered that they had been mistaken in the past in trying to encourage a state that would be of military support to them. They now thought that it was right to go for a genuinely neutral country. But that did not effect the situation with which they were now faced. It was true that the United States were anxious first to secure a cease-fire, but it must be recognised that Thailand did not really agree with the proposals for a truce and for discussions. But he was quite clear that if para-military action failed there would have to be some military intervention. If the King appealed to SEATO for support, and only the United States responded, that would have a very bad effect on world opinion. If there were to be external aggression in Laos, and SEATO agreed to action, surely there must be a common effort. A SEATO initiative would be much more effective than action by the United States alone.

The Prime Minister said that the United Kingdom position had moved slightly since he had sent his message and he was prepared to agree that any ^{intervention} ~~intervention~~ should be at the initiative of SEATO, but the whole thing would be easier to handle diplomatically if this were to be SEATO minus rather than a full SEATO operation.

The President said that if the current meeting of SEATO in Bangkok felt that the United States were not prepared to

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go beyond para-military action then in some way this would communicate itself to the Russians and there would be no negotiations - or such negotiations as there were would fail.

The Secretary of State had had discussions with Congress and he had no doubt that he could get support for joint military action to establish a bridgehead in Laos.

Sir Harold Caccia thought that it was not necessary in the first instance to go straight for a full-scale SEATO operation. Might it not be possible to go for a semi-SEATO operation, merely to keep the King established in the country and try to bring the Russians to the table?

The President said that the United States Government had now accepted, unlike the previous Administration, that they would not get any military success in that area.

The Prime Minister said that the United States should probably not take action alone but he thought that the first stage should be something that would not be a SEATO operation but would take place with the ^{fusing} ~~best~~ of SEATO. Perhaps the King might make his appeal to SEATO and then SEATO could ask the Americans and perhaps Thailand and others (though not Pakistan) to take some initiative. Could not this be the first stage?

The President said that at whatever stage action were to be taken he was clear that the U.S. and the U.K. should be politically and militarily in concert. If action were worth taking by the United States it was worth taking by other countries too.

It was true there were arguments for keeping Pakistan out of any SEATO operation, but he was not entirely convinced of this as the United States had already gone a very long way

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along the Indian road. He would be quite prepared to make it plain to Nehru that if action were not taken in Laos and the country fell to the Communists much worse would follow for India.

The Prime Minister asked if Mr. Dean Rusk would tell SEATO about the planned increase in American para-military operations.

The President said that they would be told nothing specific, although they would know in general that there had been increased activity in the area. The important thing for SEATO to be told was that the United States and the United Kingdom had a common viewpoint.

The Prime Minister said that whatever happened there must not appear to be a war between Europeans and Asiatics. Perhaps SEATO could pass a resolution for action to be taken but not make elaborate plans for a SEATO operation. But all the countries concerned would agree that some operation should be taken and should approve it. Then the United States could be asked to carry it out with necessary symbolic support. This would make it possible for the U.S.S.R. and China to look on the matter as an incident and not as a war.

The President said that the United States would like to pick up a team in this military action. He would agree that this need not necessarily be a full SEATO affair.

Mr. Bundy added that although the United States did not want all the SEATO Powers in on the plan they did not want to be alone at any stage.

The Prime Minister thought that what was required was a SEATO presence, with full diplomatic and moral support from all the SEATO Powers.

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The President then indicated, without specifying which particular plan he had in mind, what level of military contribution the United States had thought possible from SEATO Powers. He read out a list of the figures, which totalled 35,000 men, and included 8,100 men, the main part of the Commonwealth Brigade. He did not want to discuss plans then; these could of course be discussed at a later date, and troops, etc., could be settled at the same time. What he now sought was a statement by the United Kingdom of willingness to commit some troops in the area.

The Prime Minister said that it would be a SEATO operation. There could be a willingness on the part of all countries concerned to make some military contribution but when and how depended on the circumstances. A SEATO presence with a willingness on the part of all to make a contribution seemed to be enough to start with. He did not think that the United Kingdom should at this stage enter into an unlimited commitment.

The President said that if the only way to save Laos was to send a force in, would the British join in?

The Prime Minister said he would have to seek the views of his Cabinet. They would not agree to an unlimited commitment but might be prepared to agree to "Bulwark" being made available.

The President thought that this would not really be a great help. He added that the first question he would be asked by Congress, if there were to be U.S. military intervention, would be - "What are the British going to

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do?" If the United Kingdom did not play there would be much opinion in the United States against any intervention at all. The President said that he was not urging precipitate action. All were agreed that in this week there must be a further exchange of views between the military planners on both sides. If there were to be a collapse in Laos we must be ready with immediate help if asked. If we failed to do this there would be wide repercussions.

The Prime Minister agreed that there might be a wide deterioration. He thought that both he and the President agreed that Laos was a bad place in which to fight. For example, in any war it would be abandoned and the fight carried on elsewhere. But the aim should surely be for a limited objective. Indeed, a possible alternative would be to strengthen the position in Thailand and make a stand there. Perhaps the military planners could work something out on these lines. He was however prepared to put to the United Kingdom Cabinet that the United Kingdom should, if asked, be prepared to make a ^{small} military contribution to a limited objective.

The President said it was important that there should be British participation in the first instance. It was clear that the West could not just run out of Laos - if they did, Viet-Nam, Thailand and Burma would go too, and the next to be attacked would be India.

The Prime Minister said that whatever they had in mind about military plans they ought to agree on what should be

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said in public this week. It seemed as if the President wished to be able to say that the United Kingdom agreed both military and diplomatic support for military intervention, and would make a limited military contribution. He would think about this. But he would like to ask the President the really important question - "Was the thing worth doing at all?" Everybody agreed that as a military operation intervention was futile. Was it not futile politically? Those Laotians who were supported by the Americans did not seem disposed to do any fighting at all, whereas the other side did.

The President said he was hoping that the people being put down by the B.28s would bring about a more intensive retraining of local forces but he agreed that the real question was "Is it worth an effort to save Laos?"

The Prime Minister said that by itself it clearly was not, but one had to have regard to the general position and the all-round pressure exercised by the Russians. The occupation of the Rhineland was not by itself perhaps an important step but if action had been taken then to stop it subsequent history would have been entirely different. The Russians were probing the new U.S. Administration. If they were not stopped now, worse might follow. This was the point that would really swing him in deciding finally whether action was worth while.

The President agreed and said that the current offer that was being made to the Russians for a cease-fire and negotiations and a conference was politically entirely satisfactory. If they did not accept this it would show they were merely trying to exercise pressure.

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The Prime Minister said that the U.S. and the U.K. must play the hand this week as if they meant to act to save Laos, and meanwhile should get together to prepare sensible military plans.

The President said there should perhaps be two lines of military planning:

(a) There should be a plan for a full-scale SEATO operation - this plan would not be used but it might be necessary to make it in order to keep quiet some of the members of SEATO who would want the West to go much further. Mr. Bundy thought it would be necessary to set up a military planning centre and to appoint a SEATO commander. The President added that the great thing was to avoid public argument at the SEATO meeting.

(b) He thought however that the right course would be for the U.S. and the U.K. to draw up two or three plans, which should be broadly based, but which would definitely have a limited intention for limited goals.

The Prime Minister said that in the light of the discussions he would send a message to the Cabinet and to the Foreign Secretary, but he would like again to stress that the United Kingdom would not agree to an open commitment.

There was then some discussion on current SEATO plans, and it was agreed that Plan 5/61 seemed to be the only one that had any elements of realism about it. This plan envisaged about five battalions on bridgeheads across the river (that at Luang Prabhang would have to be abandoned) and might require up to 12,000 troops. The Prime Minister said that he would be quite prepared to agree to planning in Bangkok going ahead on this basis.

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There was then some discussion about the possibility of sending a joint statement to Mr. Dean Rusk and the Foreign Secretary in Bangkok. The President produced a short statement but the Prime Minister asked for a short adjournment and prepared a draft "Prime Minister's Record".

After lunch this was discussed and some amendments were made by the Americans. Eventually an agreed text was reached, of which a copy is appended to this note. A copy of this was handed to President Kennedy.

At the same time the Prime Minister prepared a short outline of the views he would send to the Foreign Secretary, subject to Cabinet approval, and a copy of this, which is attached to this note, was also handed to President Kennedy.

The meeting adjourned at 3.40 p.m.